

United Nations General Assembly, Second Committee

**Panel Discussion on
Challenges and Changes in Public Administration around the World
1 November 2001**

Challenges in Public Administration from Developing Nations

**O. P. Dwivedi, Professor,
Department of Political Science
University of Guelph, Canada**

I. Development administration: lineage and challenges

When a developmental creed emerged in the West, it posited that in order to attain development, a country's administrative structure should conform to the standards of the most advanced industrial societies. The key issue, then, was the transformation of the existing traditional machinery into the new entity. This was to be accomplished through administrative development: the modernization of the public service machinery through external inducement, transfer of technology, and training by so-called foreign experts. For this task, various prescriptive models were advocated by the Western experts. This tradition was based on the dichotomy between politics and administration; it was a system that relied on hierarchy, unity of command, political neutrality, recruitment and promotion on the merit principle, public service accountability, objectivity, and probity.

In reality, these principles were to work side by side with the existing indigenous cultures and traditional values. Thus, a parallel value system gained currency along with the Western models. For example, when the NPM movement prescribed a 'leaner but meaner state', which meant that public servants everywhere would be better trained, more professional, more globally-minded, more ethical, more productive, more prone to serve customers, and more responsive to business groups' demands in general. And of course, as the argument goes, a smaller civil service would result in better remuneration, thus eliminating opportunity as well as enticement for corruption.

Based on this premise, the state was to retreat. However, the gap thus created was to be filled by a matching progress in civil society and the private sector. Instead, poverty, civil strife, and other problems ensued; and a "true" governing system never materialized. While the West was celebrating the "retreat of the State", deprivation grew at an alarming rate in many developing nations. Corruption increased, and civil society as well as social capital deteriorated. In reality the effect was that practices, styles and structures of administration generally unrelated to local traditions, needs and realities succeeded in reproducing the symbolism, but not the substance of, for example a British, French or American administrative system.

Confronted with an ineffectual developmental bureaucracy and governing institutions, the Western solution was to call for even more administrative reforms. Thus, the most important

challenge before these countries was what to do, and how much to make their own administrative system imitative and ritualistic in order to get international aid and appreciation from the West.

It is now acknowledged that such an imitative system has not worked well. What happened?

1. For years, the Western scholars have been unable to include the alternatives in the form of non-Western contributions to developmental studies. Ignorance in the West has continued to overshadow the need to appreciate the importance of indigenous culture, traditions and style of governance, their administrative styles, which reflect the distinctiveness and complexity of their various national identities, as well as realities and cultural diversities. These factors must be taken into consideration when public service reforms and aid-related conditions are being imposed. For example, we do know that in developing nations, the nature of public expectations from their governments is basically different from those prevailing in the West; and thus it is sometimes counter-productive to force debureaucratization and privatization in the South.
2. The outer layers of each nation's style of governance are directly affected by current circumstances and global challenges. The paradox is that, while demands on the public sector to provide more services are growing, the state apparatus in developing nations is being forced to shrink and retreat. Instead, developing nations are being compelled to follow the costly fads in the industrialized nations. We also know that any profound administrative reform entails significant attitudinal and value changes, which are based on local culture and traditions. Thus, efforts at administrative restructuring, "modernization", and bringing other types of reforms must address first, either directly or indirectly, the question of the indigenous style, values and culture of governance (Nef, 1998).

From this author's viewpoint, a country's culture and style of governance are the key to the understanding of what makes a country function, it is imperative that any public sector reform forced upon on developing nations draws on the local customs, culture and traditions. When the local culture and traditions are discarded in the favour of Western-style management practices, and when there is not enough time given to these nations to see if such a transplantation has already taken root in the body politic, a hodgepodge of two value systems starts operating simultaneously with no specific standards against which effectiveness of that administrative system, as well as the conduct of public officials, could be measured. Such standards in the past have been drawn from the purely mono-cultural perspective of the North. Instead, an inclusive and multi-cultural mixture of alternate medicine is needed.

II. From mono-culture to a multi-cultural universe of public administration

By the beginning of the twentieth century, two major events occurred which shaped the future of public administration as a discipline. First was the emphasis that Woodrow Wilson and Frank W. Goodnow placed on the separation of administration from politics as the single most essential public administration reform in achieving efficiency and removing the objectionable and immoral practices of spoils and patronage besetting the democratic system of governing. While Wilson expounded his theory on separation of administration from politics in 1887, other scholars joined a steady stream of advocates for maintaining the dichotomy. By the 1950s, the

politics-administration dichotomy was assumed both as a self-evident truth and as a desirable goal. Administration was perceived as a self-contained world of its own, with its own separate values, rules and methods, which were universalistic in nature. Thus, public administration came to be known as the universe of facts, enshrined in a value-free environment, ready to be applied anywhere in the world, akin to scientific experiments as mentioned below.

The second was the rise of scientificism in the discipline. While the roots of scientific analysis in social science disciplines can be traced back to the Age of Enlightenment, slowly the two core elements of scientific method started influencing the philosophical and human sciences. These core elements are rational objectivity and quantification. The main purpose of these scientific elements was, and still is, to remove biases and fallacies of human thought by searching for 'hard data' which can be measured, and then presented in an objective and rational manner. In this context, academics and practitioners of public administration are considered to be applied scientists, who remain dispassionately aloof from that subjective (and therefore irrational) realm of culture, values and ethical issues.

Furthermore, the American scientific management specialists thought that the science of administration was an end itself worthy of systematic study and improvement. For them, government administration was a machine to be driven by scientific management theories such as POSDCORB principles, PPBS, MBO and most recently the New Public Management. It was also thought that the scientific study of administration led to the discovery of principles of administration analogous to the principles or laws of the physical sciences. And finally, it was assumed that the principles of administration determined the way in which specific administrative values, such as efficiency and economy, could be realized.

In such a scientific environment, the use of merit principle became the main ingredient sustaining the functioning of government administration. Thus, public administration turned into (as it was thought by some) a scientific endeavour in which individuality was emphasized because the individual was the unit of measurement in relation to output, efficiency and accountability. Such a philosophy was well suited for the entrenchment of the merit principle in the West because it encouraged individual achievement. It was much later, after the 1970s, that a different philosophy of administration emerged which stated that public administration could not be reduced to a very reductionist scientific experiment alone because the important imperatives of culture, spirituality, ethics and morality would remain fenced out. Thus, a tortuous evolution occurred when the issue of universalistic application of Western-born public administration was challenged.

The need for an inclusive and multicultural world of public administration: During the past century, scholars and practitioners of public administration carried out their work as if all public administration and governance values emanating from the West were universally applicable, akin to scientific principles, and local context or culture did not matter. That vestige of a one-dimensional rationalism is now slowly giving way to a fuller recognition and understanding of the impact and consequences of people's values.

Development administration has been the handmaiden of Western comparative public administration, an academic field that has not succeeded in breaking loose from its old moorings

because it still presses for Northern, universalistic designs tied to a single, competitive and capitalistic world economy. For example, details of administrative structure, procedure, financial or human-resources management, central-local relationships, organization of ministries or departments, the role of parastatals, linkages with civil society and grassroots groups for purposes of licensing, permitting, and regulation, and the recruitment/ socialization mechanisms, all these are based on the system perfected in the North. Sometimes lonely voices in the development community call for realizable change from the bottom up, and suggest that it would be desirable if the North could use many ideas from different sources in the South to enrich its own discipline of public administration as well as its protégé—development administration—by including sensitivity to the local customs, indigenous culture, as well as spirituality, thereby bridging the gap between North and South by drawing a new course which will be holistic and multi-cultural.

It is also clear that through globalization, a certain dependence and continued reliance on the theory and methodology of the Western-style administration is being emphasized. Would it not be a sad situation when everywhere in the world, not only the governing system but also the style of doing things becomes the mirror image of Western values and practices. Developing countries have a lot to change, and so does the West. One thing is clear: the current crisis of development and administration is precisely a consequence of the inability of the West to incorporate the substance of other non-Western developmental experiences into the prevailing conceptual mould. It is also clear that new approaches to North-South relations are required by acknowledging that alternatives to Western-led reforms might have some values for other nations, just as alternate medicine has finally received acceptance in the West.

The essence of this plea is in the identification of unity in diversity principle so that alternatives (based in South) do not get discarded simply because either these are not well argued, or are not couched in fine languages. At the same time, the author is not advocating a non-involvement and a total detachment of development administration from its parents, public (and comparative) administration. Because, there *are* some core values, (such as the rule of law and due process, efficiency, economy, accountability, impartiality, integrity, fairness, protecting and serving the common good, etc.) of public administration which are universal in nature and are applicable everywhere irrespective of local traditions, culture and context. Nevertheless, as argued earlier, a holistic approach to administration requires considering all alternatives available.

III. From universalistic to a holistic public administration

The following general propositions are offered as concluding observations:

1. The time has come to examine the disruptive impacts of frequent public service reorganizations and reforms, as well as a periodic paradigm shifts. We already know that it is tougher to implement than to design; and we also know that the work is not finished with implementation alone, because there is a danger of backsliding. Without ongoing nurturing, reforms do fade away. Thus, there is a need to get out of the apparent frenzy on doing many reforms so that public service institutions are able to have a breathing space to solidify gains made, and to strengthen their organizational culture. Could not we pause for some time to see what gains have been made thus far, and whether such gains are effective enough; only then

further reforms and changes should be considered. It is equally important that while contemplating new reforms, alternatives available are to be included drawn from the local circumstances, history and culture. In addition, governments should undertake a regular (periodic) assessments of progress made; because it is one thing to introduce measures of reforms but quite another to make them stick. Progress made ought to be regularly and consistently assessed.

2. Not enough attention has been paid to certain weaknesses in the government's management control framework. For example, the accountability of administrative heads of departments is still not transparent especially when they get transferred from their post too often too soon. While these administrative heads demand results and accountability from their subordinates, should not these heads be also held responsible for creating an innovative and vibrant atmosphere for their people? In the final analysis, it is through the efforts of such people that results can be achieved and good government is possible.
3. Good government also depends on the good performance of its public servants because it is the government and its state machinery that are the best defense of ordinary citizens against organized business, labour, and the powerful vested interests which seek special privileges in laws, or simply to do what they want. Strengthening of governmental institutions ought to be the top priority.
4. As mentioned earlier, in the past, the public service reforms neglected taking into account the historical perspectives and cultural dimensions (Argyriades, 2001). Sensitivity to culture and history of a nation is crucial when designing, imposing, and implementing public service reforms. Dictating reforms from outside without considering the cultural and historical factors would not achieve expected results as has been demonstrated with respect to the NPM movement.
5. Each time a new paradigm gets created someone in the West, it starts with the notion that any problem can be solved if there exists a detailed blueprint, sufficient external aid, and political will. However, our experience has been that these three prerequisites would not be met by most of the developing world; and hence the experiment is not successful. In place of requiring developing nations to implement such blueprints any time when a new paradigm gets manufactured, the time has come to focus and concentrate of results instead of creating grand visions. Because such visions get multiplied as each international development institution tries to broaden its scope and idealism pertaining to areas of human development. We should also consider that perhaps the objectives of such visions and paradigm are not realistic enough. Perhaps in our optimism, we have not paid enough attention to strengthen institutions (which are supposed to implement such spectacular plans) because we have taken for granted that ideals and plans are self-administering. Perhaps the time has also come to pause and reflect on the question: has the medicine prescribed by the West been reasonable and realistic enough? And if one does not take into account such factors as culture and style of governance, local traditions and beliefs, politics and style of doing things, social and demographic plurality, law and order situation, civil society, and responsible and ethical governance, the new Century may not be much different than what we have gone through

with the last 50 years of the past century. The essential need is to shift from materialist to post-materialist and spiritual standards.

Should not this challenge be faced *first* by the bigger players in development arena (such as the World Bank, IMF and several bi-lateral development aid agencies) so that they could transform their rhetoric into reality? Should not they ought to pursue a basic bottom-up policy, thinking first of the poor peoples, their governing system, their customs and traditions, and most importantly encouraging alternatives to the Western models so that developing nations may be able to choose between alternatives rather than being consigned to the philosophy of “only one size fits all”. Finally, before another paradigm gets manufactured in the West (along with the notion that any problem can be solved with a detailed blue-print provided, some foreign aid promised, and the necessary political will on the part of recipient secured), has not the time come to focus on results instead of keep on creating grand visions because such grand visions keep on multiplying as each international institution tries to broaden its idealism and scope of activities in the field of human development (Einhorn, 2001). Are the objectives of globalization realistic enough? Have we paid adequate attention to the quality of institutions responsible to implement such grandiose plans? Or, we have taken it granted that ideals and plans are self-effecting. And thus, the time has really come to pause and reflect on the matter: whether the prescription for change needs to be altered. My view is that the new century demands a new thinking to face the greatest dilemma before the humanity: how come a small group of nations keep on “progressing” while the majority remains poor and deprived.

References:

Argyriades, Demetrios. (2001). “Governance and Public Administration in the 21st Century: New Trends and New Techniques”. A Report by the General Rapporteur for the International Congress of Administrative Sciences, held in Athens, Greece, 9-13 July 2001, published by the International Institute of Administrative Sciences, Brussels, Belgium.

Caiden, Gerald E., and O.P. Dwivedi. (2001). “Official Ethics and Corruption” in *Where Corruption Lives*, (edited by Gerald E. Caiden, O.P. Dwivedi, and Joseph G. Jabbara). Bloomfield, CT., USA: Kumarian Press, pp.245-255.

Dwivedi, O.P. (1994), *Development Administration: From Underdevelopment to Sustainable Development*, London, UK: Macmillan Press.

Dwivedi, O.P. and Keith M. Henderson. (1999). “Alternative Administration: Human-Needs-Centred and Sustainable”, in *Bureaucracy and the Alternatives in World Perspective*, (edited by Keith M. Henderson and O.P. Dwivedi), London: Macmillan Press, pp. 25-51.

Dwivedi, O.P. and James Iain Gow. (1999). *From Bureaucracy to Public Management: The Administrative Culture of the Government of Canada*, Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 1999.

Einhorn, Jessica (2001). “The World Bank’s Mission Creep”, *Foreign Affairs*. Vol. 80, no. 5, September-October 2001, pp. 22-35.

Nef, Jorge (1998). "Administrative Culture in Latin America: Historical and Structural Outline", *Africanus*, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 19-32.